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DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CAN AND WHA/PD

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SUBJECT: CANADA REACTS OVERWHELMINGLY POSITIVE TO
PRESIDENT'S JUNE 4 SPEECH

REF: STATE 64616

Classified By: A/PolCouns Kurt van der Walde, reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (U) Summary: Across Canada the reaction to President Obama,s June 4 speech in Cairo was overwhelmingly positive. Canadian Muslim leaders, national and local politicians and journalists described the speech as inspirational, respectful, and empowering. Many remarked it was a turning point in U.S. relations with the Muslim world. A large number of interlocutors remarked on the profound and positive effect the speech had on Canadian Muslim youth. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In Ottawa, Muslim politicians Liberal MP Yasmin Ratansi and Liberal Senator Mobina Jaffer, as well as Liberal Senator Mac Harb, who is a Lebanese Christian immigrant to Canada, all shared the view that President Obama,s speech marked a turning point in U.S. relations with the Muslim world. (Note: Ratansi is the only federal-level elected official who is a Muslim.) All three highlighted especially the positive effect on Muslim youth, who had a high degree of awareness of the speech and discussed it with their friends in person and on the Internet in webchat forums. The three legislators said they were convinced that the speech had helped prevent radicalization among large segments of at-risk Canadian Muslim youth. Senator Jaffer, in particular, spoke about her contacts with groups of young people, who only a few months ago she saw drifting down the path to self-radicalization. Following the speech, she expressed surprise at their "almost complete 180 degree change."

¶3. (C) Liberal MP Robert Oliphant, whose Toronto-area riding is home to one of Canada,s largest Muslim communities, described his constituents' reactions as "overwhelmingly positive" and "effusive." Oliphant said his constituents praised President Obama for acknowledging Muslim arts, science, and culture and their positive legacy for the world. Members of the community were happy to hear, he said, what they felt was the President,s repudiation of a link between Islam and terrorism, the acknowledgment that Iraq was a war of choice, and the recognition that Hamas has a role to play in the Middle East. Many were also glad that the President did not use the word "terrorist" in his speech. While reaction was positive overall, people between the ages of 28 and 50, a segment of the Muslim population that has historically had difficulties integrating into Canadian society, tended to be more cautiously optimistic. Oliphant said this demographic tends to be more pessimistic about most issues, even those not directly related to the Muslim. Nonetheless, Oliphant described a "new willingness to engage" the U.S. by his Muslim constituents.

¶4. (C) Muslims in Oliphant,s riding are overwhelmingly South Asians and are therefore mostly interested in events in Pakistan and Afghanistan while less attuned to the Arab-Israeli conflict, he said. The Federal MPs and Senators said their constituents told them they will be watching

closely to see if the President's inspiring rhetoric matches his future policy choices. Reflecting the diversity of the Canadian Muslim community, they talked about a litany of issues for the Muslim community, including progress in the Middle East Peace Process; the situation in Iraq; U.S. relations with non-democratic allies including Egypt and Saudi Arabia; the role of the U.S. in Pakistan and the manner in which the Pakistani government combats the Swat Valley Qin which the Pakistani government combats the Swat Valley insurgency; and education, women,s rights and democracy in the Middle East.

15. (C) Mobeen Khaja, President of the Association of Progressive Muslims, opined that the President "spoke from his heart" and delivered a message from the American people that he called "bold and courageous." He lauded the symbolism of the President,s decision to speak at Al Azhar, as well. Khaja stressed that the President took the first step in dialogue, and acknowledged that the Muslim world has the duty to respond. The challenge, he continued, will be communicating that message of reciprocity and engagement to the grass-roots. Education and outreach to the youth are keys to success in conveying those themes to target audiences. Khaja expressed interest in cultivating greater contact with moderate U.S. Muslim organizations similar to his own, such as the Council of Pakistan-American Affairs.

16. (C) Wahida Valiante, President of the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC), and Executive Director Dr. Zijad Delic expressed "delight" at the speech, saying it fostered "true hope" of reconciliation with the Muslim world. They saw the President,s remarks on Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories and acknowledgement of Iran's right to nuclear

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energy for civilian purposes as breaks with the Bush administration's policies. Imam Delic commented that his mosque members discussed the speech at great length after Friday prayers. He added that the CIC's magazine contained several articles on the speech. Delic went on to describe the speech as &brave,8 &honest8 and &truthful8 and added that Muslims should accept the hand that has been extended to them. Valiante noted that the language of the speech negated the talk of a clash of civilizations.

17. (C) Imam Khaled Abdul-Hamid Syed El Azhary of Ottawa's main mosque praised the President's speech and expressed the need for a coordinated response by the Muslim world. An Egyptian educated at Al Azhar, Imam Syed noted that his Ottawa congregation hails from all over the world, represents a broad array of Muslim opinion. He divided his congregation's reactions into three broad groups: those who admired it, those who were more cautious and wanted to see the President's words translated into practical steps, and those who considered it was all a trick and deception. The young and the elderly were less skeptical than middle-aged Muslims. The Imam noted that the best-received parts of the speech were those that: emphasized the positive role of Islam, denounced stereotyping, showed acceptance of the hijab, and promised to help U.S. Muslims fulfill "zakat" or religious charity obligations.

Calgary

18. (C) Both ethnic and mainstream media in Alberta gave widespread, favorable coverage to the speech. A local Islamic congregation invited the Acting Consul General in Calgary to give remarks at an event celebrating the President,s speech. The mood of the congregation was euphoric, with members noting symbolisms in the President,s speech. They expressed delight at the setting of the speech at Cairo University, which showcased the long history of higher learning in the Muslim world, and the President's evident pride in using his complete name. There was a sense that the speech was groundbreaking. Syed Soharwardy, an imam

associated with the Calgary-based Islamic Supreme Council of Canada described himself as "ecstatic" about the speech. Shan Ali, the publisher of the Weekly Canada Express, Canada's largest bilingual newspaper for Canadians of South Asian origin, expressed his strong support for ideas and a value embodied in the speech. He said he was eager to see what happens next. Acting CG was struck by how well Consulate staff were received at the event, which was a clear change from previous encounters in recent years.

Montreal

¶9. (C) Head of the Muslim Council of Montreal Salam Elmenyawli shared, what he described as, "constructive criticisms" of President Obama's speech with consulate PolOff. He underlined that the President should have acknowledged the impact of the Israel-Palestinian conflict on the Muslim community and said it was "inappropriate" to compare the civil rights movement in the U.S. to the conflict in Israel. While the former was a matter of equality, he said, the latter is a matter of nationalism. He added that the parties should not set preconditions to discuss peace. Despite these criticisms, he added, overall he found the speech "very respectful" and appreciated the President's use of the Quran. PolOff also met with a South Asian community leader who saw the speech as a shift in direction for the U.S. and a Qwho saw the speech as a shift in direction for the U.S. and a closing of the gap between the U.S. and the Muslim world. However, he said people in his community think that there is little a President can do with a four year mandate and they will wait to see what changes come. At the recent Conference of Montreal, the Bank of Lebanon Governor Riad Toufic Salame made a point of seeking out USG representatives to share his positive impressions of the speech.

Toronto

¶10. (C) Reaction in Toronto to the President's June 4 speech has been extremely positive. CG and PAO spoke about President Obama's speech at a Canadian Ethnic Media Association (CEMA) event held on the same day. Journalists from a Lebanese and Somali-language television said the U.S. President spoke "sincerely" to the Muslim world. They expressed appreciation for his making clear that the war against terrorism was not against Muslims. Advisor to the

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Canadian Forces in Kandahar Ahmadulla Faizi and Canadian Forces Reservist Usman Valiente (the son of CIC President Wahida Valiente), spoke to PAS specialist, praising the speech as a turning point in U.S.-Muslim relations. Mohamed Robert Heft, the director of a center for new Muslim converts and his colleague Sayyid Ahmed Amiruddin described themselves as "impressed" by the President's use of the Quran and the respect he had shown for the Muslim community. A youth director at Masjid El Noor (a well-known Toronto mosque) offered a more subdued response. He recounted that the young men in his program agreed that the President's speech was "promising," but they were only cautiously optimistic, waiting for actions to follow the words. In print media, two columnists for the small, weekly Toronto Sun accused the President of not saying enough about human rights in the Muslim world.

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